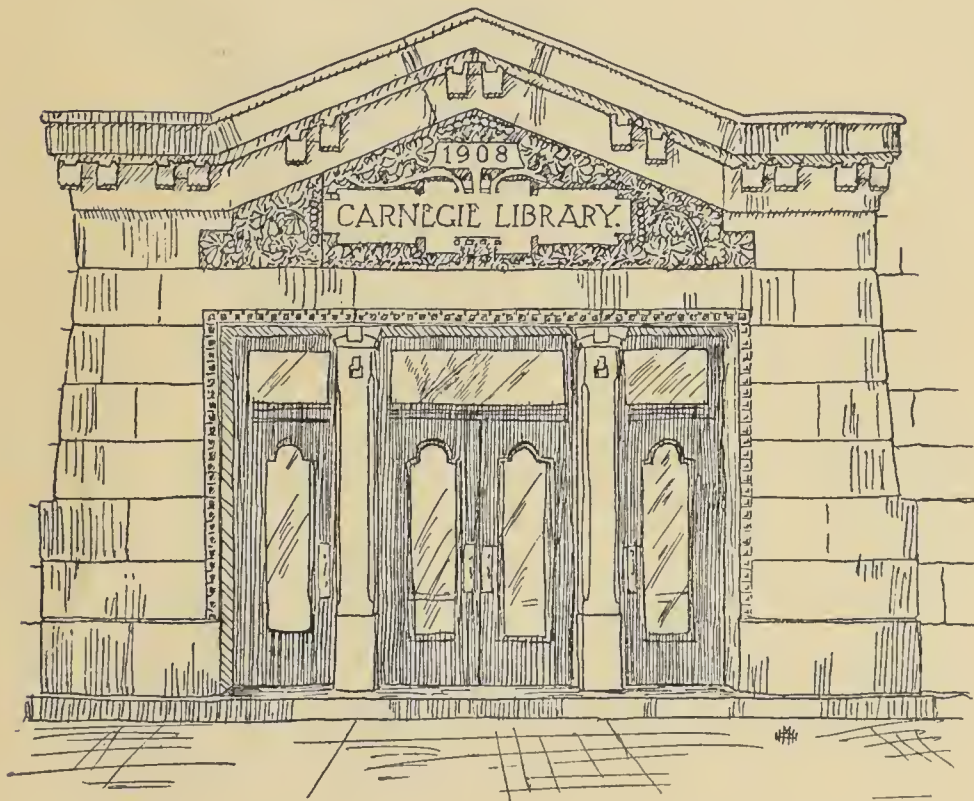


OBERLIN COLLEGE

# THE STORY OF THE LIBE

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The present expansion of the physical plant of the library, though notable, is by no means unique. Since the Eighties, at least, the college librarian has in most years viewed the incoming flood of print with an enthusiasm tempered by fear of a more or less imminent overflow. Even as early as 1848 the librarian presented a request to the Prudential Committee asking that an extra shelf might be put up. Always eventually by some means more space has been provided.

At first the college books were kept in any room that happened to be handy—from 1855 until after the Civil War this was in the old chapel on the square. Society Hall, which was erected in 1868 just across the street from the present site of Finney Chapel, contained space on the upper floor for both the college and literary-society libraries. In 1884-85 the Spear Library was built, also on the square, facing Tappan walk not far from North Main Street. The first floor was reserved for use as a natural history museum but the second floor was available for book alcoves and a small reading room. At the dedication of this building on November 2, 1885, the marble statue of the "Reading Girl" was the center of interest according to the *Review*. The sculptor was John Adams Jackson, an American artist of some repute in his day. This piece had been done in Florence in the Sixties and rated a laudatory article in the *Berliner Zeitung* in 1869. It was given to Oberlin by an American collector particularly for the library. "Surely," ecstasized the *Review*, "[her] eager, intellectual face with its intense absorption must be an inspiration to the most unappreciative mind."

But the librarian was more interested in books and shelving space than statues, and within a decade, despite the fact that only a few hundred dollars was available annually for purchases, he was complaining that many volumes had to be piled on tables and on the floor and temporary shelves had to be put up in the tiny reading room. In 1903 the museum was removed from the lower floor and the overcrowding was thus somewhat relieved. Already, however, it had become apparent that an entire new building was needed. The problem was solved in a most unusual, not to say providential, manner.

Sometime in the same year, 1903, a young Cleveland matron appeared at the Citizens National Bank of Oberlin and asked to borrow \$50,000. Cassie Chadwick is described as having had a figure of fashionable "hour-glass lines" on which she "wore clothes like a duchess." Her face, it is said, was that "of a slightly sad angel" and her eyes were "large, deep and sincere." Cassie was, you will gather, quite fetching. As collateral for the proposed loan she offered a personal note for half a million dollars signed by Andrew Carnegie. She was not at liberty, she said, to explain why the steel magnate should be so generous.



So they gave her the fifty grand, and she came again and again until she had borrowed \$350,000. Back in Cleveland she bought pianos by the dozen and provided all three of her maids with mink coats. Then in November, 1904, the news came to Oberlin that Cassie Chadwick was a professional autograph manufacturer who had already served one term for practicing her art. The bank closed its doors. \$350,000 out of Oberlin didn't leave much. Townspeople lost their savings and students lost the money they had put aside to pay board bills.

Of course, Carnegie wasn't responsible, but because his name had been used he gave \$15,000 to make up the losses of college students. One day President King, while in New York, went in to thank Carnegie for his kindness. He came out with a promise of \$125,000 to build Oberlin a new library building.

And so the 75th anniversary of the college was celebrated in 1908 by the dedication of Finney Chapel and the Carnegie Library. William Coolidge Lane, Harvard librarian, delivered the dedicatory address. Cassie Chadwick got ten years.

In the new building there were originally only four floors of stacks with the Olney Art Collection displayed in the space above them. Soon the shelves were overcrowded again. The removal of the art exhibit to the new Allen Art Building during the World War years left room for two more levels of glass and steel stacks. These, also, were soon filled, and thousands of items had to be sent to storage in the attics of various college buildings. And now again new dikes have been built to catch the overflowing tide of books.

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The great college or university library is a really recent development. The Harvard library of the time of the American Revolution could have been placed in one of our downstairs open-shelf rooms, and any other American college library of that date would have found room and to spare in the reserve book alcove. Even in 1880 there was not one American college that possessed half as many books as Oberlin does today.

Oberlin's first books were not purchased; they were the castoff volumes from Yankee preachers' libraries. In 1835 the total value of all college books was estimated at a hundred dollars. In the next year 800 volumes were reported—on literature, history, philosophy, religion, music, slavery, and phrenology. A good many of them were in Greek, Hebrew and Latin; two were in French. In 1840 a gift of 2,000 books was received from philanthropic English Quakers and other British reformers. The collection grew slowly in those early years. By 1882 some 15,000 volumes had been accumulated, and by the end of the century, 40,000. When the Carnegie library was opened 100,000 volumes were brought over from the old building along with the "Reading Girl."



This number included the college library and the library of the literary societies, the latter donated to the main library at that time. Extracurricular student life in all American colleges formerly centered around the literary societies, and one of the leading activities of such societies was the collection of books. Before the Civil War Oberlin's two men's societies had over a thousand volumes and the ladies' societies had begun a library by sending a delegation down to Mr. Fitch's bookstore to purchase Motley's *Dutch Republic*, Tennyson's *Works*, and Irving's *Washington*. After the war all the societies joined together in forming the Union Library Association. This organization sponsored a series of lectures each year by such luminaries as Russell H. Conwell, Mark Twain and Elbert Hubbard, and used the profits to buy books for the combined literary societies' library. Though the U.L.A. library was smaller, as late as the Nineties at least it was probably more valuable than the college library. The U.L.A. collection was the most important single acquisition in the library's history, an appropriate gift from earlier student generations to later ones.

The rate of growth accelerated after 1908. In 1920 the accessioning of the 200,000th volume was celebrated by a staff banquet at the Park Hotel. The 300,000 mark was passed before the end of the decade. Yesterday when a book called *The Social Relations of Science* by J. G. Crowther was accessioned it became the 410,579th bound volume.

Oberlin has had but five librarians. The first two were librarians only incidentally. Dear old Dr. Dascomb also taught all the science and Henry Whipple was principal of the Preparatory Department. Henry Matson, a former stenographer and Congregational minister, served at Society Hall for fifteen years—the first full-time librarian.

Azariah Root was librarian for forty years, from 1887 to 1927. He was one of Oberlin's chief builders. His responsibilities and contributions were so numerous that I shall catalog only a few of them. He was an active worker in Oberlin community affairs, a founder of the Anti-Saloon League, vice-chairman of the faculty, a lecturer before many library schools, President of the American Library Association and of the Bibliographical Society of America. In his later years he was everywhere recognized as the dean of college librarians. More important to us, as one of his most distinguished fellow-librarians (William Warner Bishop) said of him after his death, "by prodigious industry and unremitting toil," he developed a very ordinary college library into "a real institution." He made, I may add, an institution which could attract Julian Fowler in 1928 from the fine new library at the University of Cincinnati to be his successor.

Librarians of the early years were looked upon more as guardians than as guides. Guardians of the books against the students and of the students against the books. The first library bookplate states that students must report all damage to a book when returning it. There still seems to be



need for vigilance to repress the impulses of the annotator and the marginal artist. At an early date the librarian was given authority to withhold from circulation any book he considered unfit for student use. Only twenty years ago certain franker writings and translations of the classics that might be used as "ponies" were kept locked up on the top floor of the stacks. The effort to protect the student from the books seems to have been given up as hopeless.

In the Nineteenth Century American colleges did not expect their students to make much use of the library in connection with regular courses. As late as 1884 the Oberlin librarian reported that the library was chiefly used by students in preparing orations, essays and briefs for literary society meetings, "exhibitions" and Commencement. Those were the days before "outside reading."

For many years no reading room was provided. In the Eighties the U.L.A. reading room was open afternoons "from one o'clock until prayers" and the college library reading room only four hours a day: two hours for "ladies" and two for "gentlemen." In the Nineties Spear Library was open to all without discrimination as to sex from 7:15 in the morning until five in the afternoon, with time out for lunch. When in 1902 gas light gave way to electricity the library was opened in the evenings and a new era began in the intellectual and social history of the college. The large reading room in the Carnegie building was often overcrowded even before the first World War. The spacious new reserve-book reading room on the first floor with its nearly 200 chairs should relieve this situation.

In number of bound volumes the Oberlin library stands twenty-fifth among all the university and college libraries in the United States. In Ohio the only such library to surpass or even remotely compare in size to ours at Oberlin is that of Ohio State. For a while at least this great collection will have plenty of room on the more than thirteen miles of shelves in the expanded building. But the present librarian is less interested in size than in quality and use. He is particularly proud of the fact that nearly all college and theological students draw out some unreserved books every year. An indication of the quality of the collection may be found in the fact that last year 61 other libraries in 21 states and Canada borrowed books from Oberlin through the interlibrary loan system.

A century and a quarter ago George Ticknor, studying at Göttingen in Germany, made the discovery that "the Library is not only the first convenience of the University, but that it is the very first necessity,—that it is the life and the spirit, . . . ." The library, wrote Oberlin's Librarian Henry Matson, is "the intellectual treasury of the college." It has been one of our chief privileges in Oberlin to work in this great and growing library, so effectively staffed and liberally administered, and now conveniently housed.